

CHAPTER TWO



Jackal and Monkey stood at the edge of a wide canyon. Monkey asked, If I leap and make it to the other side, was that my destiny or merely my good luck?

Jackal replied, Our destiny can be taken in hand, molded, and shaped, while chance makes foolishness out of whatever attempts to control it. Does this make destiny the master of luck?

—COLLECTED FOLKTALES

Jack had found himself in a great many hopeless situations in his life, but this one was the grand champion—a twenty-two-year record for dire occurrences. He only hoped this wouldn't be the last occurrence and sent up yet another prayer that he might live to see his twenty-third year.

The temperature had dropped precipitously. His spine was assaulted by the rocky ground on which he lay, but really that was the least of his discomforts.

His vision had begun to swim about an hour ago, and so at first

he thought the girl looming above him was a mirage. She peered down at his hiding spot behind a cluster of coarse shrubbery, her head cocked at an angle. Jack went to stand, years of breeding kicking in, his muscle memory offended at the idea of not standing in the presence of a lady, but apparently his muscles had forgotten the bullet currently lodged within them. And the girl was Lagrimari—not strictly a lady, but a woman nonetheless—and a beautiful one, he noticed as he squinted into the dying light. Wild, midnight curls floated carelessly around her head, and piercing dark eyes regarded him. Her dress was drab and tattered, but her smooth skin was a confectioner's delight. His stomach growled. When was the last time he'd eaten?

Her presence meant he was still on the Lagrimari side of the mountain range bordering the two lands and had yet to cross the other, more powerful barrier keeping him from his home of Elsira: the Mantle.

The girl frowned down at him, taking in his bedraggled appearance. From his position lying on the ground, he tried his best to smooth his ripped uniform, the green fatigues of the Lagrimari army. Her confusion was apparent. Jack was obviously Elsiran; aside from his skin tone, the ginger hair and golden honey-colored eyes were a dead giveaway. And yet he wore the uniform of his enemy.

"Please don't be scared," he said in Lagrimari. Her brows rose toward her hairline as she scanned his supine and bloodied body. Well, that *was* rather a ridiculous thing to say. "I only meant that I mean you no harm. I . . ." He struggled with how to explain himself.

There were two possibilities. She could be a nationalist who would turn him in to the squad of soldiers currently combing the mountain for him, perhaps to gain favor with the government, or

she could be like so many Lagrimari citizens, beaten down by the war with no real loyalty to their dictator or his thugs. If she was the former, he was already dead, so he took a chance with the truth.

“You see, I was undercover, spying from within the Lagrimari army. But now there are men looking for me, they’re not far, but . . .” He paused to take a breath; the effort of speaking was draining. He suspected he had several cracked or broken ribs in addition to the gunshot wound. His vision swirled again, and the girl turned into two. Two beautiful girls. If these were his last moments before traveling to the World After, then at least he had something pleasant to look at.

He blinked rapidly and took another strained breath. His mission was not complete; he could not die yet. “Can you help me? Please. I’ve got to get back to Elsira.”

She stole an anxious glance skyward before kneeling next to him. Her cool hand moved to his forehead. The simple touch was soothing, and a wave of tension rolled off him.

“You must be delirious.” Her voice was rich, deeper than he’d expected. It eased the harsh consonants of the Lagrimari language, for the first time making it sound like something he could imagine being pleasant to listen to. She worked at the remaining buttons of his shirt, pulling the fabric apart to reveal his ruined chest. Her expression was appraising as she viewed the damage, then sat back on her haunches, pensive.

“It probably looks worse than it is,” he said.

“I doubt that.”

Jack’s chuckle sounded deranged to his own ears, so it was no surprise that the girl looked at him askance. He winced—laughing was a bad idea at this point—and struggled for breath again. “The soldiers . . . they’re after me. I have to get back through the Mantle.”

“Shh,” she said, peering closely at him. “Hush all that foolishness; you’re not in your right mind. Though I’ll admit, you speak Lagrimari surprisingly well. I’m not sure what happened to you, but you should save your strength.”

She closed her eyes, and suddenly his whole body grew warmer, lighter. The odd sensation of Earthsong pulsated through him. He had only experienced it once before, and it hadn’t been quite like this. The touch of her magic stroked him intimately, like a brush of fingers across his skin. The soft vibration cascaded over his entire body, leaving him feeling weightless.

He gasped, pulling in a breath, and it was very nearly an easy thing to accomplish. Tears pricked his eyes. “Sovereign bless you.”

Her expression was grave as she dug around in her bag. “It’s just a patch. You must have ticked someone off real good. It’d take quite a while to fix you up properly, and the storm’s coming. You need to find shelter.”

She retrieved a jar filled with a sweet-smelling substance and began spreading it over his wounds. The Earthsong had turned down the volume of his pain, and the cream soothed him even more.

“What is that?”

“Just a balm. Helps with burns, cuts.” Her hand paused for a moment. “Never gunshot wounds, but it’s worth a try.”

He laid his head back on the ground, closing his eyes to savor the ability to breathe deeply again. “A quick rest and I’ll be back on my way. Need to keep moving, though. Need to get back.”

“Back through the Mantle?” Her tone vibrated with skepticism. “And away from the Lagrimari soldiers chasing you?”

“Yes.” Her palm met his forehead again. She thought he was delusional. He wished he was. Wished the last few weeks had been nothing but the imaginings of an impaired mind.